



AN INVITATION TO...

ADVENT

WORSHIP SERIES





# AN INVITATION TO...

# ADVENT

During this season of Advent, we'll hear afresh the familiar names and stories of the coming of Christ at Christmas. Often, we approach Advent as a time of waiting and preparation: waiting for Christ to come again, by remembering how he first came among us; and preparing ourselves to receive Jesus into our hearts and, someday, into our world once more. It's the story of how Jesus came into the world to change the world, a story that the familiar characters of Christmas are each invited to participate in, in their own unique way. This unending song of invitation echoes across the centuries, inviting all people to know the love, hope, and salvation offered by Jesus. But in Romans 10, we are asked to consider how people will be able to hear that song and believe, unless they have been invited. **We received that invitation ourselves, and we RSVP'd with faith. We're also called to be God's great invitation to all the people and in all the places we will be this season.**



# *AN INVITATION TO A FRESH START*

ISAIAH 2:1-5

It's hard to believe that we're only a month away from Christmas! I feel like Advent really crept up on me this year, but it's hard to mind when the church looks so beautiful and festive. Christmas celebrations always seem to come together in the end, anyway, in some fashion, no matter how busy or relaxed, prepared or unprepared, we are. The guests arrive, whether family or friends; presents are exchanged; meals eaten; trees and decorations appreciated and the whole thing is all-too-soon packed away again for another year.

I have a question for you. What is your perfect Christmas celebration? Now, if this was Bible study, I'd ask you all to give an answer out loud, but you can make a mental list instead this morning. What needs to happen, who needs to be there, for Christmas to be perfect for you? Perhaps a good meal with friends or family, Christmas dinner with turkey and all the trimmings, forms the centrepiece of your celebration. Maybe it's the gift exchange, civilized and relaxed if it's all adults, wild and chaotically fun if there's some little ones involved. It could be time off work or other commitments, a quiet extra day or two to yourself, Christmas music in the background, feet up and book in hand.

If we really wanted to dream, beyond the boundaries of what is really possible for us at Christmas, our perfect celebration could involve all sorts of things: unlimited money to spend on gifts for people we care about, or to give away entirely to others in need; the perfect gift for ourselves, given by someone who loves us, opportunity and means to travel, whether it's southwards to the sunshine or northwest to mountains and snow, or even further afield; old friends and family who live far away or are no longer with us returned to us for Christmas Day. Christmas celebrations, perfect or otherwise, can elicit a whole slew of emotions: nostalgia, even grief, as we remember celebrations past; excitement and happiness, for celebrations present with loved ones, or with our children and grandchildren; peace and contentment, in the glow of lights and quiet winter evenings; worry over getting things just right and satisfying the whole extended family, in-laws and out-laws alike; frustration when the whole dinner party plus presents plus weather forecast plus guest list just snowballs into something unmanageable.



It'd be easy this morning, here at church, to dismiss a lot of that as distractions or shallow emotion, brought on by worldly Christmas-y ideas, things we ought not to want or worry over, that we wouldn't be thinking about at all, if we just focussed on the true significance of Christmas: Jesus, coming into the world, fulfilling God's ancient and steadfastly repeated promise of a Saviour. But those perfect Christmas longings, the yearning, the feelings of happiness and togetherness that we seek out at Christmas, even the worry and frustration, rooted as they are in wanting those positive experiences to materialize for ourselves and others....the longing and the yearning are real, for many people in our towns and cities, and yes, even for us, those who do believe in Jesus and celebrate Advent and Christmas for his sake.

In many ways, though, the world around us and our lives in it could not be further from that perfect Christmas. There have been at least a couple of shootings in the news this past week, in the US and further afield; our government and its agencies have been embroiled in a lengthy inquiry into actions taken during an unhappy period of civil unrest earlier this year. There's the constant worry about our healthcare system, under pressure as it is, and the economy and how long this inflationary period will last. And then there're our personal troubles and stresses too, each one of us bearing a particular burden of our own.

And the further we get into Advent, the closer we are to Christmas, don't you find that bad things are so much worse, feel so much harder to bear, as we approach Christmas morning? I've been wondering why that is; why hard or painful things seem to pack an extra wallop, just because they happen in the month of December. I think it's because, somewhere deep inside, we know that the world should be otherwise; that those hard, bad things genuinely ought not to happen in our lives, are not the way the world was made to be. Christmas is the day we celebrate Jesus' coming into the world to right those wrong things, a promise fulfilled and a new promise made, all at once, that we are absolutely correct in our belief that bad things ought not to happen, and that God has come and is coming to make all things new and right. And I think, even if some people have mostly forgotten - or never knew - that that is what Christmas is about, somewhere deep inside, God still whispers an answer to our longing for peace, home, togetherness, and abundance with hope, and never so clearly as he does at Christmas.

Our Scripture reading today from the prophet Isaiah is that hope, a hopeful vision of a world made new, drawn together in God. But even in this hopeful text, there are hints of trouble and suffering. Clearly, war looms large; else why would there be weapons of war nearby to inspire the prophet's imagination as he seeks to convey God's message to God's people? But the trouble and worry run much deeper than that.

The threat of war comes from a neighbouring nation, Assyria, with a vast and powerful army and aggressive leadership which has already annexed Israel, the northern kingdom of God's people. The leaders of Judah, the southern kingdom and what's left of God's free people, are trying to figure out how best to survive.

The question has become this: do they trust God's promises or do they trust themselves, their own capacity to self-rescue and the deal they're thinking of making with the enemy at the gates? These first two chapters of Isaiah's prophetic book are like a hope sandwich, with the bit we read today the hopeful filling between two slices of Judah's bad behaviour as the bread.

God had promised his people, first, that the world would be blessed by God's people, and later that they would lead the world into salvation. But God's people, especially their religious and political leaders, didn't seem to believe that anymore. Their faith was empty of meaning; their worship, carefully conducted, didn't affect their hearts, let alone shape their actions; their politics, as they sought to ally themselves with Assyria, betrayed their total lack of trust in God's plan for them as a nation of blessing. They no longer had any hope that God would fulfill his promises, choosing to align themselves instead with the empty promises and hidden fears of the world.

But my point today isn't in the details of how Judean society had gone very, very wrong. What we need to know right now is that Judea, God's people, were in a mess; an armed and warlike enemy at their borders, a broken society rife with injustice, false worship and fear, a fragile bond, on their side, with the God they used to trust absolutely and now barely thought-of at all. And here's Isaiah, inserting this hopeful message from God into the middle of the mess, a message about unity, oneness with God, reconciliation, peace, and light. There is no basis in the world around Isaiah for any expectation of a future that looks like this. None at all. Isaiah's message must have seemed totally disconnected from reality, harping on about ancient promises in the midst of a moral and political crisis.

This promised future that God's unfolding for them just doesn't line up with the behaviour and words and beliefs of the people, with what's been happening in their world. They do not trust in God's promises anymore, their choice to make a deal with Assyria, their empty worship, the absence of justice and generosity in their society, we know that Judea no longer believes. And in the absence of God's promises, the future is bound to be a repeat of the past. But Judea's unbelief doesn't make God's promise to them any less true. And so the prophet somehow hears and sees God's hope for his people, and speaks a message that transcends the reality on the ground, of the trouble and burdens of daily life, and of larger societal and geopolitical realities, too.

In between the unpacking of everything that's gone wrong and may yet go wrong for God's people, Isaiah's hopeful sandwich filling is good news for two reasons: first, he shares a vision of God's promised future and it is not a repeat of the past, but a brand new fresh start. And then he gives God's people something to hold on to, to aim toward, even in the midst of a troubling time. But admittedly the vision itself is a little obscure-sounding to our modern ears. "In days to come" is not next month or next year. We might better understand that as the latter days, or the days after the people's messiah, their Saviour, comes. The first big chunk of Isaiah's book is full of references to this coming Saviour; this time of year, we often read about the one who shall be called wonderful counsellor, prince of peace, mighty God, about the child to be born of a young woman who would be a great, saving leader... ..it's Jesus. And these latter days, or days to come, refer to Jesus' second advent - not Christmas, circa year 1AD, but the coming of Christ again on some future day.

Zion, Jerusalem, House of Jacob - all references to God's people and their place in the world: their land, their city, their ancestry. The Lord is on a mountain because, in the great heroic age of their past, God was always found on a mountain, by Moses, by Elijah; later, Jesus would likewise climb a mountain and be transfigured, transformed and revealed, in God's presence. Everyone, every nation, all people, will be drawn as one to the mountain, streaming toward God, flowing into his presence, gathering to learn God's ways as the only way to live. God will create peace among the nations by way of arbitration and reconciliation, by making things right between them, not by violently subduing anyone. Weapons of war will be reforged into the tools of agriculture, of growing food and cultivating crops, so not only will there be peace, but abundance, too. And then the invitation to come; to walk in God's light, the light and hope of this wonderful vision; and to walk in that light now.

Peace and abundance, home and togetherness, that's what Isaiah proclaimed; it's exactly what God knows we long for, the answer to our Christmas yearnings. It's not a perfectly decorated trees or an indulgent feast of a meal, I grant you; but this future that God's got planned, that begins with Jesus at Christmas and will be completely here when Christ comes again, this future speaks to the driving needs beneath the seasonal details. It speaks to that confused certainty in each human heart that the world should not be a place of worry, pain, injustice, of brokenness, death and fear, where the only light and hope and goodness come from what we can cobble together on our own. And we are answered with an invitation to hope for that fresh start for all creation in the future, and to walk in light of that hope today.

The reason that the cultural, worldly messages of Advent and Christmas are so powerful is that our human yearning is real and profound. We struggle to find light and hope in the empty promises and hidden fear of the world around us, so, this time of year, at least, we try to self-rescue with our nostalgic Christmas songs, our gift-giving, our decorations and festive gatherings. All good things; but Isaiah takes us to a mountain and shows us what our hearts are actually tuned for: a world made new, a fresh start as bright as new fallen snow, all of us together as we seek God, a God who will be present with us in a new way, more real and tangible than God has been since Christ himself was born and lived among us.

In the same way that Isaiah must have sounded ridiculously out of touch with the reality of the world around him, our proclamations of hope and a new, peaceful, abundant future where all is well and right and whole bear little resemblance to the world around us a lot of the time. But the best good news of all, when we're trying to be a people of hope in a broken world, is that we know that God takes seriously all the hard, wrong things that happen, that God knows change is needed, change that is transformative and all-encompassing, that there are obstacles - quite often human-made ones - that stand in hope's way. God's world-changing plans are in progress, in this long Advent era between Christ's first coming at Christmas and his second coming, some day. But God's plan is not only a vision of global transformation, like the one Isaiah proclaims; we're also invited to live toward that day, here and now. Turn to God, and learn God's ways, and follow them; be people who seek peace, share abundance, gather each other in, and who live even now in God's presence, trusting in all God's promises.

However hard the new reality might be to believe in sometimes, however easy it is to latch onto the empty promises and hidden fear of this world, there's power in walking in God's light now.

So I invite you, this Advent season, as you go about your daily activities, as you shop and wrap gifts, trim trees and roast turkeys, plan festivities and sing Christmas songs, I invite you to walk in the light of the Lord yourself, full of hope, and invite everyone you meet to join you. Thanks be to God, amen.



# *AN INVITATION TO UNEXPECTED JOY*

LUKE 1:26-45

Here we are again – the month of December! Last month of the calendar year, first month of the Christian year, a month that ends with one of the biggest cultural holidays of the year, and an important Christian celebration, second only to Easter. It is no wonder that the season of Advent feels very much like a time of waiting, of preparation, for Christians and people without religious belief alike. In fact, our ancient tradition is to observe the season of Advent as a time of waiting and preparation: waiting for Christ to come again, by remembering how he first came among us; and preparing ourselves to receive Jesus into our hearts and, someday, into our world once more.

But you know, I've been thinking about Advent and our usual themes of watchful waiting and preparation, and it seems to me that perhaps they don't on their own really capture the excitement we feel this time of year, not for presents and parties, necessarily, and not even just for Jesus' birth and our remembering of that world-changing event. But...it's like we've all been sent an invitation to a really amazing event, a gala party; and we wait, invitation stuck to the fridge, thinking and dreaming and getting ready, for the day of the big celebration. That kind of feeling – of being invited to something incredible, and marking off the days on our calendars in excitement and anticipation until it finally comes.

And when we take that idea of invitation with us when we read our familiar Advent and Christmas Scriptures, well, it seems like everyone's being invited into the story of how Jesus came into the world to change the world, a story that the familiar characters of Christmas are each invited to participate in, in their own unique way.

Last week, God's people, forgetful of their faith, clinging to their freedom, in the long-ago kingdom of Judah, they were invited to believe in and trust and hope for a fresh start, a new future of peace and justice and abundance, just as God had promised them. We are, too.

This week, the invitation is to unexpected joy.

If you've been a church-goer for more than a year or two, you've heard this story before. It's so familiar to us, immortalised in art, captured in stained glass, proclaimed in music and song. Personally, it's one of my favourites, this beginning of Christmas and Christ coming into the world.

It truly begins before what we read together today: with Zechariah, the aged and dutiful priest in a Judean backwater town, and his wife Elizabeth, elderly, too, and a daughter of the ancient lineage of priests herself, stretching back all the way to the time of Moses and his brother Aaron. Gabriel meets Zechariah in the Temple, and proclaims to him that he and his wife will be having a baby, a son, who will be prophet and prelude and general disturbance. Zechariah responds with an all-too relatable worn-down skepticism; Elizabeth, with incandescent happiness.

Now, Gabriel returns, this time to visit a very young woman, Mary, and proclaims another child to be born through her, if she's willing. And of course, brave, bold, faithful Mary, says 'yes' to God's Son, the Messiah, coming into the world through her. I love this story; after the dismal end of the Old Testament and a few centuries of nothing at all from God...this is like watching your favourite hockey team rally in the third period with an unexpected turnover at centre ice in game seven of the playoffs. It's huge - God has begun to move, at last, and good things are starting to happen for his people once more.

There is so much concentrated joy and happiness and excitement in this story, and we'll talk about all of it before we're done today. But if we're looking for unexpected joy, I think we have to start with the moment when Elizabeth and Mary, John and Jesus, meet one another.

Elizabeth and in utero baby John have such a positive, visceral physical reaction to Mary and to not-yet-born Jesus. John leaps for joy - I'm sure most of us have felt a baby kick, whether we are mothers or not. A leap for joy must have felt like unmistakably more to Elizabeth, and perhaps inspired her own reaction.

We've probably all seen videos of surprise homecomings of family members, or experienced it ourselves: our bodies feel and respond to what we deeply love and long for, suddenly there, our instant reactions sometimes even betraying us in public. Like Elizabeth, we might uncontrollably respond by crying out in tears and yells and hugs, or by laughter or weak knees, even in shocked stillness. And so - baby John the Baptist joyfully leaps for baby Jesus, and Elizabeth shouts and cries out her joy.

But to add another layer to this happy moment, we are told that Elizabeth's response is driven by the Holy Spirit, present with her. Elizabeth and baby John, without asking or even knowing to ask, receive insight from God about what is true, but not yet able to be seen or proven, what can only be held onto by faith: that the Messiah, the Saviour that God's people have hoped for and needed, that all creation longs for, that Messiah is here, in their home, and the Messiah is in young Mary's womb. And there is joy.

That first moment of meeting Jesus – not knowing much about it, mostly feeling our way through – that moment, that experience is something many of us can share in and remember from our own lives. That first moment of being one-on-one with Jesus, finding him suddenly present where we are; like baby John, maybe you leapt for joy literally or in your heart, or like Elizabeth, there might've been some bellowing; there might have been tears of relief or overwhelmed awe, or even a shocked stillness. An unexpected, uncontrolled response. That first one-on-one with Jesus is the first unexpected joy of Christian life, from which all other joys follow. It adds a new flavour to talk about being born again as Christians when we think of John the Baptist's first meeting, womb to womb, as he recognised the Messiah he'd spend his life proclaiming and making the world ready to receive.

That first one-on-one meeting with Jesus, discovering that he is the Messiah, for us, the Messiah for you...it's bound to be unexpected, because we can't really predict or prepare for it; there's nothing really for us to do! Meeting Jesus requires nothing of us, and Jesus himself is simply there, invitation extended.

This unusual encounter between two unborn babies and their mothers – we are given an example and a reminder of what it's like for Jesus to be with us, for us to be face-to-face, heart-to-heart with him, in this simplest and most stripped-back form. There's no words, no actions, no gestures – how can there be, they're not even born yet! – and yet, John the Baptist met Jesus that day, knew Jesus for his Saviour and guiding purpose of his life, and he leapt for joy. I wonder – do we forget, sometimes, that we can still meet Jesus like this? Still be in Christ's presence, in this simple and uncomplicated way? We can still find that unexpected joy in simply being face-to-face with our Messiah, and recognising him for who He is, just for you and me.



The more obvious joy, of course, in this story, is in the genuine connection that instantly forms between these two very different pregnant women. Different because Mary is very young, and might well not be too keen to be pregnant, unmarried as she was in a culture that demanded marriage before children ought to be born. Whereas Elizabeth's pregnancy is the answer to a lifetime of praying for a child, both her and her husband Zechariah, and she is now old enough that her pregnancy is nearly as unlikely as Mary's. Their instant, genuine connection is rather like the friendships that form at church, between younger women and men, and men and women a generation or two older. There are so few intergenerational communities in our society, other than families, that those unlikely cross-generational friendships can be rich sources of mutual support and encouragement, vitality and wisdom – I know I've often felt blessed by friendships with church companions who are older and younger than me.

I wonder if that's why Mary went to visit Elizabeth – it was enough of a trip to that Judean hill-country town that it had to be intentional. So why did Mary go?

Perhaps she was having some doubts about this whole angelic visit, divine baby situation; Gabriel told her about Elizabeth being further along – and thus visibly – pregnant. Maybe Mary was feeling a bit skeptical and seeking independent verification of her own early, too-soon-to-show, pregnancy. That doesn't come up in the conversation we have between the two women, though.

So maybe instead Mary was having second thoughts about this socially-risky course of action that saying 'yes' to God had put her on. Maybe she needed some encouragement, and a safe person with whom to share her troubles, someone to be a solid, reliable presence and comfort in this serious situation she found herself. Or maybe Mary went to encourage Elizabeth, to affirm to her relative not only that her own experience was real, but also to share the joy of this extraordinary thing that God was doing in both of their lives – I hope so, anyway. Because shared joy is what Mary got! Elizabeth fairly explodes with it, with exuberant joy.

Elizabeth, we are told, was filled with the Holy Spirit and began exclaiming with a loud cry – in the original Greek language of the Bible, that "loud cry" is described as "mega" – like megaphone kind of loud. Elizabeth started bellowing blessings as soon as Mary appeared. Blessed is Mary, blessed is Jesus, blessed is Elizabeth since Mary and Jesus came to visit her! And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

That last blessing – I wonder if Elizabeth was talking about herself, as much as she was Mary. These two women, so different in age, experience and life circumstances, shared the bond of being blessed, of believing the impossible is possible with God, of choosing to live by their faith in God despite the risks, of being full of joy and unable to prove that their joyous miracles are just that: the work of God. Did you ever think about how Mary and Elizabeth are the only people, right then, on the whole earth, out of all humanity, who know what God's doing? They are the first two people, these two pregnant women, one young and one old, in a backwater town, in an unimportant province of Rome, these unlikely people are the first people to know that God is doing what God said he'd do: that he's sending his Son, a Saviour and Messiah, at last. God promised them each a child, and a child, a baby, both Mary and Elizabeth will have.

If Mary came seeking encouragement and affirmation, she certainly got it; if she came seeking to give encouragement, well, the explosion of joy from Elizabeth tells us that she did. That coming together, gathering as a community of faithful believers – even in a community of two – when we're looking to share our joy in Jesus, in what God does...there's no better place to do it than with a friend. And saying 'yes' to God together, accepting his invitation to trust in the promises he makes to us, being fellow pilgrims who encourage one another on the journey, who get together and reverberate joy back and forth together, bellowing at one another about blessings...we should do that, in our community of faithful believers. Let's try to do that more, this year.

But something more happens when Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John, come together. Filled with the Holy Spirit, in the presence of Christ, these two women together realise that they are part of something much larger than their own individual destinies. These babies, this joy, is not just for them. We didn't read what happens next today; so let me read some for you now. In her joy and with this new realization they've had about the scope and scale of what God has done, Mary sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

And then, Mary's song grows even greater than herself, greater than she and Elizabeth in that hill-country town in Judea: "[The Lord] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the arrogance of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has come to the aid of his people Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

A wonderful, revolutionary song; a song that, if we all sang it and lived it, would cast the world into disarray, or rather, put things in their right places again, for the first time since sin came into creation and broke and scattered it all. A song for the future, sung in Mary and Elizabeth’s blessed present moment, pregnant with the Messiah and with the last prophet of Israel, John the Baptist.

But also a song of the past, sung by another mother, yearning for a baby, who knew, too, that her child was not only for her but for all God’s people, forever.

Hannah was the wife of Elkanah, and the mother of the prophet Samuel. But, like Mary and Elizabeth, proclaiming and full of the Spirit, Hannah was more than simply someone’s mother. She, too, was a prophet in her own right, and sings the promise that her child is for the cause of the Lord. And her ancient song is just like Mary’s. Hannah’s heart likewise exulted in the Lord, and she sang of her rejoicing. She also sang of the breaking of power wielded by the proud, the arrogant, the strong; of abundance for those going without; of lifting the poor from the ash heap and levelling the social order: no princes, and no poor, either.

All of this, Hannah sang and Mary sings, the Lord will do, has done, is doing.

Both Hannah and Mary exclaim their joy in their God. Both Hannah and Mary take heart in the promise that the Lord considers, cares for, and acts on behalf of the lowly — despite what one might expect, and contrary to how we human beings behave ourselves. It is not for kings or the mighty and powerful that the Lord has regard; rather it is for all the rest of us that God does great things. And the greatest thing of all is that God kept his promise to send help to our suffering world, to bring light to its dark corners, peace to its broken places, hope to those who try hard to help, too, and joy to everyone who thought no help was ever coming.

In Mary’s song, begun by Hannah and first heard anew, in the present tense, by Elizabeth, the whole world is forever invited into that joy.



So, there we are: a concentrated dose of joy to keep us moving on our Advent journey!

Our closing hymn this morning – Joy to the World – between the words and the tune, it always makes me think of a rushing river and a plummeting waterfall, I guess because it starts so high and crashes downward, and then goes up and down really fast at the end – just like rapids on a wild river. And the joy in this familiar Advent story of Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John, is like that, too: the joy just keeps rushing and splashing ahead, from that one-on-one leap of joy between the unborn Jesus and John, to the swirling together of Mary and Elizabeth in their joyful, faithful community of two, and then exploding out, across the world, toppling the powerful and buoying up the lowly.

All that joy – and the source of it is Jesus, only just come into the world. We can barely even imagine what's to come. Thanks be to God, amen.

# *AN INVITATION TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS*

LUKE 2:8-20

Back in my former career, as a research scientist, we were always told to perfect our elevator pitch. Have any of you heard of an elevator pitch before?

An elevator pitch is a very quick practiced answer or short speech that you can give to someone who asks, “what do you do” or “what are you working on?” So quick that you could get the whole speech out in the time it takes to ride an elevator between a couple of floors in an office building or hotel. And that’s what, 30 seconds or a minute at most? It comes from the business world, of course; academic and science-types picked up on it years later. A good elevator pitch in the business world won’t close the deal, but it’ll get your foot in the door, and an opportunity for further conversation. The idea for us scientists was that, at professional conference or over dinner, we needed to be able to share something interesting enough about our research or our work that the person we were speaking to would want to know more about it. We wouldn’t need to chase after them; they’d be hooked, and want to continue the conversation themselves, curious or impressed in some way. And then we could share the entirety of what was often a complex bit of research requiring a good deal more than thirty seconds to get across.

That’s what an elevator pitch is: not a full explanation or closing the deal, but hooking the listener in so they’ll be keen to hear more, or even pursue you for more, if you really nail it.

The angels delivered a brilliant elevator pitch to the shepherds that night: “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

That’s like...twenty seconds. Plus a few more seconds for the “glory to God” bit afterwards.

And the shepherds were hooked; curious enough to go looking, to pursue this sign the angels proclaimed.

It's another one of those stories we know so very well, if we've been anywhere near a church this time of year. Last week, Mary and Elizabeth, even not-yet-born John the Baptist, became unlikely prophets, proclaiming Christ's coming. Now, the shepherds become equally unlikely evangelists, sharing the good news that Christ is come. Everyone, we are told, was amazed at what the shepherds said. The celebratory, rejoicing mood of the angels is clearly contagious, spreading first to the shepherds and then onward, to everyone they spoke to, who were amazed and probably hooked, too, wanting to hear more.

Good news of any kind is like that, I think, and this was especially good, good news. But have you ever wondered just what it was that the shepherds said?

Perhaps it's an easy question to answer. We can suppose that they told the tale of the angels, and of a message of peace and hope and good will. They spoke about the baby in the manger, who was right where the angels had said he would be. It's the same thing we've been saying and repeating every Advent, every Christmas, year after year, decade after decade, century after century.

But how the shepherds said it – the details – that we don't know, exactly. It can't have been too long and involved, unless people two thousand years ago had longer attention spans than we do.

But I'm guessing not; in fact, given that the shepherds were not respectable, learned members of society, I would hazard a guess that people were not inclined to listen to them...unless they had a hook, a punchy something to grab attention. If we look a little closer at the angel's familiar words, I think we can find the shepherd's hook: the thing that hit hard and personal for them, the thing that would've made their listeners listen just that little bit longer. Just one line – one phrase from the angel's message might have done the trick.

At one time or another, most of us have likely received a birth announcement, maybe a phone call or a text or in conversation about a friend or a daughter or another relative who's had a baby. When someone tells you that their daughter or grand-daughter had a baby - and now they have a new grandchild! – I am sure that you're always very happy for them and so you're able, in a small way, to share in their joy with them. But that is quite a different matter than having your whole life changed because this child that's been born is yours, or is somehow going to involve you personally. If you're a parent or grandparent, I bet you know what I mean!

The angel said to the shepherds: “to you is born this day a Saviour. ” To you.



There is a particular quirk in the Greek language used to record this angelic message, a detail that is very revealing about the meaning of that “to you” and how the shepherds understood and told this story. That “to you” in the Greek can only be used to mean something that is coming directly to another person. If we were speaking ancient Greek, and I wanted give a gift to you, that’s the phrase I’d use. It’s a very personal, direct way of indicating that something is for someone, or a group of people.

The angel tells these shepherds that a Saviour has been born, a Saviour who will bring peace and hope. But far from some generic announcement, this particular occasion is personal: this Saviour has been born to you; Jesus Christ was born for them. It’s personal, and their whole lives could change. The shepherds were involved in Jesus’ birth in a far more dramatic and significant way than simply hearing about his birth. And even more than that: the shepherds were invited into the story, invited to go and discover the place, the baby, for themselves.

We may under-estimate just what an extraordinary invitation the angels give them. Suppose that, in place of a whole host of angels on the hillside that night, it was a company of Roman soldiers instead. And a Roman centurion shouted, “hear ye, hear ye, there has been born this day, in the city of Rome, a son to Caesar Augustus, and he shall be the heir to the throne of the Empire!”

Now admittedly, we need to suspend reality for a moment and imagine that this group of Judean shepherds could easily get to the city of Rome. But imagine that they could, and decided amongst themselves to go over to Rome and see this thing that the centurion had made known to them. Do you think, if they showed up on Caesar Augustus’ doorstep at his palace in Rome, do you think that they’d have been let in? If they’d said, “we’re Judean shepherds and we heard this news of a new son, born to the Emperor, and we’d like to see him for ourselves,” would the palace guards have said, “sure, come on in. The baby’s this way.”

Of course not. Yet someone vastly more important than any earthly ruler was born, and these shepherds were invited in, welcomed and encouraged to go and see. To them a Saviour really was born that day; Jesus was born for them.

So the shepherds go to Bethlehem, so they can see this thing that Lord has done, and recognize the sign that the angel described. The sign, of course, was the baby wrapped up and in a manger. But it’s a sign, not proof.

Rather like Mary and Elizabeth last week who got together, not to compare stories and confirm pregnancies, but to reverberate joy and bellow about blessings, the shepherds believe absolutely in what they've been told. They're going to see the baby, not test the truth of the angel's proclamation of a Saviour born to them. Signs don't prove anything, anyway; signs point us toward something, signs inform us about our surroundings and how to get where we need to go. The sign the shepherds saw in that stable was this: a Saviour, the Son of God, had been born on their level. In a barn, surrounded by animals, at night, in a village. Jesus was sleeping rough, in a manger, like the shepherds did on the hillside; no crib for a bed, as we sing this time of year. The shepherds could relate to not sleeping in a bed, most nights.

The sign in the stable, the baby tucked up in the manger, pointed to the truth that for the shepherds and everyone else like them in the world, the birth of the Saviour was for them.

Luke tells us that people were amazed at "what the shepherds said." The story of the angels lighting up the night sky was part of what the shepherds said, and of course, something like that – it would amaze people. Probably the fact that the shepherds found in Bethlehem exactly what they had been told they would find was part of what the shepherds said, and that too, would amaze and appeal to their more skeptical listeners. But the most amazing thing the shepherds said is also the one thing we tend to forget about in our own focus on the glitter and brilliance of the angels: that the Saviour who is Christ the Lord was born to and for those shepherds.

If the shepherds said, as likely they did, "This Saviour came for me! To me this day the Son of God, the Messiah, was born...to me," then that was a message full of wonder, joy, and above all, of hope. Now that's an elevator pitch! Their whole lives, changed by this birth announcement, upended and never the same. Even when they went back to their flocks and carried on shepherding, can you imagine they'd ever forget? Of course not. In their hearts and minds, they'd always know: the Saviour was born for them. It's a very personal "to you," but it's also very much a plural pronoun: to you all, everywhere and for all time. To you - you and me – was born this Saviour, too. And that is good news.

Imagine, though, if the shepherds had...not gone to Bethlehem to see the sign, and had never told anyone what they'd experienced.

A silent Christmas Eve, but not in the lovely and peaceful “Silent Night, Holy Night” way – a Christmas Eve where the good news...just stopped; where the shepherds did not pick up the celebration, the praising, the amazement, the joy, proclaimed by the angels and then propelled, by the shepherds, into the neighbourhood. A Christmas Eve without the contagious joy, the midnight rush to Bethlehem, the amazing story shared. The shepherds would’ve believed, regardless; we know this, because they say that they believed the angels already. So they had the good news, for them, and it would change their lives, regardless, because that is what the good news of Jesus does. But it wouldn’t have gotten any further that night, if they had failed to tell everyone what they had seen and heard. I’m not sure that news really counts as news if it’s not being told, shared, among people. Surely it’s only news if it is presented, reported upon, proclaimed; otherwise I think it’s just a private thought or a personal experience or lifeless information.

But of course, that didn’t happen. The shepherds were NOT silent, not at all - in fact, they told everyone their amazing tale of angels and a baby and a Saviour born to them. But you know – there’s not likely to be any deep theology or intellectual polish in the tale the shepherds told. Most shepherds back then were not well-educated, compared to the religious leaders and great philosophers of the day. Churchgoers, most likely, or rather synagogue-goers, and so conversant with the basics of Jewish faith. But far from the articulate, knowledgeable likes of the Pharisees or Sadducees, or even, several months from that night, the wise Magi of the east.

Ordinary, under-educated, working men and boys were Jesus’ first evangelists. They used plain words to talk about their experience, to share this good news that had happened to them. Their elevator pitch likely would not include sophisticated words or complex, Scripturally-proven ideas. Simply a personal, amazing experience, told with total sincerity and deep awe: “angels appeared last night over the hill where I work, and they said that the Saviour of the world was born to me, to bring peace and hope and good things into my life. They said if I went to Bethlehem, I would see a sign, that I would be able to see the Saviour myself - and I did! Me, a shepherd. To me is born and given this child.”

That’s bang-on twenty seconds - I timed it. Plus a few more seconds for the “glory to God” bit afterwards. And everyone was amazed.



And I am very sure, human nature being what it is, that the conversation continued from there.

One of the primary and most repeated invitations we receive from Jesus is to share the good news. Even on the night of his birth, that's what the shepherds did. It is news that is deeply personal, yet also for the whole world and every being in it. It's news that must be shared with others, yet can only be understood, truly, through one's own life, can only be told by way of our own lives, and the whole-life change this baby being born to us makes in each one of us.

I think, sometimes, we get bogged down in it all, when we try to respond to Jesus' invitation to share the good new. It's so big and so personal, so complex and so simple, so powerful and so amazing...how do you share that? What words could possibly convey the significance of Jesus to someone who maybe doesn't especially care or know much about it all?

Well, the angels managed it, and so did the shepherds: shining, concise statements that invited their hearers to share in their own joy and awe, and hooked them in to hear more...to perhaps one day experience the good news for themselves. But not right that minute.

The entirety of Scripture was not covered; the richness of prophetic fulfillment, the depth of sin and brokenness was not discussed; the whole arc of Jesus' life from birth to death to resurrection was not included...that'd come later. That comes later.

Instead, we've got simple, personal, genuine and sincere: an elevator pitch that hooked the hearers, that opened the door to a conversation about more – a conversation that maybe didn't include the shepherds; I suspect any further questions had to have been directed to the teachers at the synagogue, to, someday, John the Baptist, and eventually, to Jesus Himself.

But it was the shepherds who began the journey for others, who invited them to make that same journey to Bethlehem that they did, who have continued to invite the curious, the faithful, the humble and the broken to journey to Bethlehem and see the Saviour, born to them, too.

You've all worked out where I'm going with this, I expect; but here it is, nonetheless. Have you got an elevator pitch of your own? A 30-second speech about how this Saviour, born to you, has mattered to you? Can you come up with one?

Plain, ordinary words, a single, genuine, jargon-free experience of Jesus, how he has become your own Saviour and that has made all the difference,? A hook, to invite the listener to ask, "and then what happened?" or "what did you do next?" How else will people be able to hear the good news - and believe it - unless they've been invited, personally, by someone they know and respect, or even love?

This, an elevator pitch of our own, as we pick up the shepherd's work of sharing the good news, this is how we answer God's call to be his great invitation to all people and in all the places we will be this Advent season. So that is my challenge for you, as we head into the second half of Advent: prepare your elevator pitch for Jesus, and don't be silent. And everyone will be amazed. Thanks be to God, amen.

# *AN INVITATION TO EVERYONE*

MATTHEW 2:1-12

There's an old saying: never let the facts get in the way of a good story. Have you heard that one before? The internet seems conflicted on who said it first, or if it emerged from multiple mouths in different times and places. Maybe it's just a universal joke, disguising a truth about human nature.

A better saying, I think, is not to let the facts get in the way of telling the truth. When I was being taught to write, a distinction was drawn between writing to present facts and writing to communicate the truth. There's a difference.

A statement that tells the truth may not contain any facts at all, but still be true, still teach us something true about ourselves, our world or even our faith. Bare facts don't tell us much at all, until we make them into a story or use them to answer a question.

In any event, telling the truth without getting too bogged down in facts seems to have been a guiding principle for medieval European Christian teachers and scholars, over thirteen hundred years ago. In my travels, I once visited Durham Cathedral in the northeastern part of England. It's been a site of Christian worship for a very long time. The present cathedral, whose construction began in 1093, was built over a much, much older one, from the early medieval period. If you've heard of the Lindisfarne gospels, they've a connection to Durham; if you've watched the first two Harry Potter films, the cathedral and its buildings stood in for Hogwarts.

Among the relics of Durham, there is the tomb of an important early medieval historian and teacher: the Venerable Bede, who lived in the late 600's to the early 700's AD. Bede was and still is considered to be a gifted researcher and historian. It's a little odd to imagine someone writing books of history so long ago, in what is, to us, a historical period. But write Bede did, using his monastery's library with over 200 volumes, books and scrolls from all across Europe, some already ancient even then.

Bede's world was surprisingly cosmopolitan; people travelled, often over great distances – not as often as we do, these days, but visitors from the European continent and further afield were not unexpected.

Bede is also remembered as a good preacher and teacher, communicating the truths of the Gospel to not very literate congregations of Christians, to people who would never be able to afford a Bible of their own, let alone learn the Latin necessary to read one.

So Bede, like all those who taught and preached back then, had to make his messages memorable, really embed them in his listeners hearts and minds; they'd never be able to look up stories in Scripture for themselves. Part of preaching and teaching in a memorable way is to use strong images and imaginative story-telling, and that is what Bede did.

The Magi - the wisemen - have a rich mythology surrounding them, beyond what's in the Bible passage we read today (the only place they appear in Scripture). I bet some of you have heard names given to the Magi – Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar. And if I asked you to picture them in your imagination, I'm guessing they look like this: an old man, with white hair and long white beard; a younger man, with a ruddy complexion; a dark-skinned man, probably with a beard, too. Sound about right? Those are the “classic” Magi.

The names are superb; mysterious and Persian-sounding, evoking wind-swept sand dunes in an ancient desert. The descriptions, showing different races and nations and ages, a wonderful image of the wideness of Christ's saving intention.

All made up; not a bit of it rooted in fact, beyond the far less detailed description in Matthew's Gospel. An imaginative invention, likely of the Venerable Bede, preaching seven hundred years after the birth of Christ. Not at all factual, yet absolutely true. And strikingly modern in its sensibility.

The story of the Magi is a story of the wideness of God's invitation, one that extends beyond any boundaries of age, ethnicity, or identity that we human beings like to use to divide ourselves up. Jesus's message and salvation would and does extend beyond the boundaries of the ancient Jewish nation and culture. And if adding depth and detail and variety to the Magi's characters help us to remember that, then that is a good and true story to tell.

Being an insider, a king and a part Jewish culture, did not lead Herod to the manger, to the child born to him. But it did lead the Magi there.



The Magi turn up in Herod's court as foreigners seeking to pay homage - a public display of respect - to a newborn king...who was not Herod, and not a member of his family. Herod and the religious leaders were well-acquainted, we assume, with the rich history of Israel, with the prophet's writings who all promised a Messiah, a Saviour-King, for God's people. Jesus, as this Messiah, should have been instantly and obviously recognized; there should've been a whole procession of the royal court and the Temple priests, following the Magi to Jesus.

But there wasn't; instead, the Magi, not knowing any details about Jesus or prophetic fulfillment or the history of Israel's kings, with curiosity and their sense of wonder tweaked by a star, find their way to the child, the baby Jesus, on their own. And we see, in the homage-paying and gift-giving, an appreciation for the kingly-ness and significance of Christ without knowing much more about him, or God, than that they followed a star to find him.

In a very real way, the Magi came at the manger from entirely the wrong direction, or rather, an unexpected direction. They were not of the people of God; they were likely leaders in their own religion of Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia, of Babylon, Israel's historical enemies. Their spiritual seeking did not involve Israel's familiar ways of Temple sacrifices and studying the Torah and prayer and praise. They followed a star, an astrological phenomenon, for miles and miles, into a foreign kingdom. And yet, the Magi were able to discover a remarkable, transcendent truth, when they found what they'd been searching for.

We live in a time of great spiritual agitation. Gone is much of the social pressure to commit and conform to a particular religion, Christian or otherwise. Spiritual seekers have before them a vast buffet of possibilities to taste-test and choose from, from approaches not dissimilar to those of the Magi to traditional religions from far-flung cultures, to psychotherapeutic practices like manifesting good things and self-care rituals. A diversity of ideas, near-endless information, available at the click of a mouse or the swipe of a finger for spiritual seekers of all sorts who are attempting to make their way to a fulfilling destination as they respond to and seek to satisfy a deep interior longing.

Where our gut reaction might be to condemn these wandering seekers of our own age, Matthew the Gospel-writer, in a surprising twist, did not.

Rather like the Venerable Bede, writing in the early middle ages with a modern-sounding, cosmopolitan image of the multiethnic Magi, Matthew approached the issue of alternative spiritualities differently than we would in this famous and unique story. A story that he alone chose to include in his gospel. Surprising, because Matthew is the gospel writer who focuses the most on embedding Jesus in that historic Jewish, prophetic fulfillment context. Yet here Matthew is, not affirming the substance of these Zoroastrian Magi's religion, but recognizing and valuing the integrity of their purpose in seeking the answer that lay beneath that wandering star.

In their yearning, their curiosity, their wonder, these spiritual seekers of old are better informed about the nature of what they're seeking and what they find - the child Jesus - than those who should be in the know. The Magi discovered the transcendent truth of a baby, a child-King whose birth is such a significant event that God's creation marks it with a star, that is so vast in its impact that spiritual seekers are moved to journey without any clear destination, that their seeking is both honoured in the Gospel and rewarded in their meeting Jesus.

And they've also taught generations of Christians things that, in our efforts to make our faith seem contemporary and reasonable and real, we all too often smother out: the wonder, the mystery, the transcendent presence of God in this child born to us, the gratitude, the deep emotional response within us at having our yearning answered, our seeking end, in finding and being found.

Human beings are made for belief, for wonder, for spiritual seeking; as children, we believe in so many extraordinary things! The big question of belief at Christmas these days is usually, "do you believe in Santa Claus," and when we are young, we like the small rituals that go with that belief: letters to the North Pole, tuning in to the Santa Tracker from NORAD, milk and cookies laid out by the tree, stockings waiting to be filled, eager ears listening for hoofs on the roof, a smudge of soot on the cheek from Santa's kiss, discovered on Christmas morning. Parents and grandparents, I bet you love to share those rituals, to nurture the wonder and excitement of their performance and to encourage belief...for a few years. As much as we participate in those rituals for our children, it's only children who are expected to believe, and then it is a mark of "growing up" when that belief is lost.

Santa, the Easter bunny, imaginary friends, the tooth fairy, ghost stories, fairies in the garden...all those beliefs we eventually unlearn as we grow from children into adults. But it's kind of a shame that our in-born instinct for awe and mystery and wonder, for belief, is something we are taught is wrong, that disbelief and suspicion and facts over truth are the "mature" ways to live.

I wonder what our spiritual seeking would be like, if instead we'd been encouraged to redirect our desire to believe in mysteries and powers greater than ourselves toward something true, toward Jesus.

St. Augustine, an even earlier Christian thinker than the Venerable Bede, wrote a beautiful prayer, that names a spiritual longing in the heart of every human being: "you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O Lord."

It is a universal longing, I think, this yearning for reunion with our Creator, the author of our lives, the crafter of our world, the One who loves us...perhaps we are alike in our spiritual seeking, even if we don't recognize it in ourselves, even if we name it differently.

Any seeker, by chance or by intentional pursuit, may find their way to Jesus' manger. The Church exists in the world because of the determination and faith of those who stumbled into the hay surrounding that manger and were amazed...all of us have, once, if we're here today. Or we're heading that way.

Some of those seekers, like the Magi, may well be better able to kneel at the manger in awe and gratitude than we who have known and worshipped for a lifetime...we, who know more place-names on the road map of the spiritual journey to Bethlehem, but may have lost our sense of mystery and wonder and awe.

The Magi remind us of that wonder and amazement and awe, each Christmas; and they also remind us that everyone has been invited to Christ's birth celebration, even those who've been travelling radically different paths on their search for truth, meaning, and home.

Because, after all: what were the Magi really seeking? Not Jesus; not as we've come to know him; not as God's people expected him to be. They were seeking a king, a curiosity, perhaps; a wonder, a possibility that had been revealed to them, temptingly, just a little in the star they followed.

And what they found was what they expected, and also something different, and more. The Magi did not become Christians as far as we know; they didn't plant a church or join the early Christian community after Christ's death and resurrection. Bethlehem, the baby born to them, the manger: just a single way-point on their spiritual journey; changed, we can assume, by their travelling and meeting the child, as one always is by a pilgrim-journey. But rarely do people today come to the church for the first time because they've already found Jesus; they come seeking...something. We hope that, among us and in the presence of God, they will find Jesus.

In this Advent season of invitation, the Magi are an image of the spiritually hungry, those to whom God extends the invitation of the manger, of joy, of hope, of a child born to us. The stable doors were wide-open in welcome, and the invitation was to come and see, come and find.

When we, together, express that same invitational, intentional wide-open welcome, we serve as a beacon, like the star, for all who are restless for a true home, for spiritual fulness. That star, so diligently followed across desert and mountain and foreign territory by the Magi, the pull of that star, is replicated a thousand times over by churches scattered in towns and cities and country crossroads far and near. Every one of us has our own story to tell about our journey to the manger, how we responded to that wide-open stable door. We are all present today at the invitation of God, who initiates our asking, our seeking and our finding. Whether we love the truth of the story with all the imaginative details or prefer the facts, stripped bare, the Magi's spiritual yearning and their journey to satisfy it reveal an awesome, mysterious truth: we are all invited, all welcome, at the celebration of Jesus' birth, because it is God's intention

to invite everyone into the kingdom of his Son. Thanks be to God, amen.